decolonising

social impact design

BA THESIS

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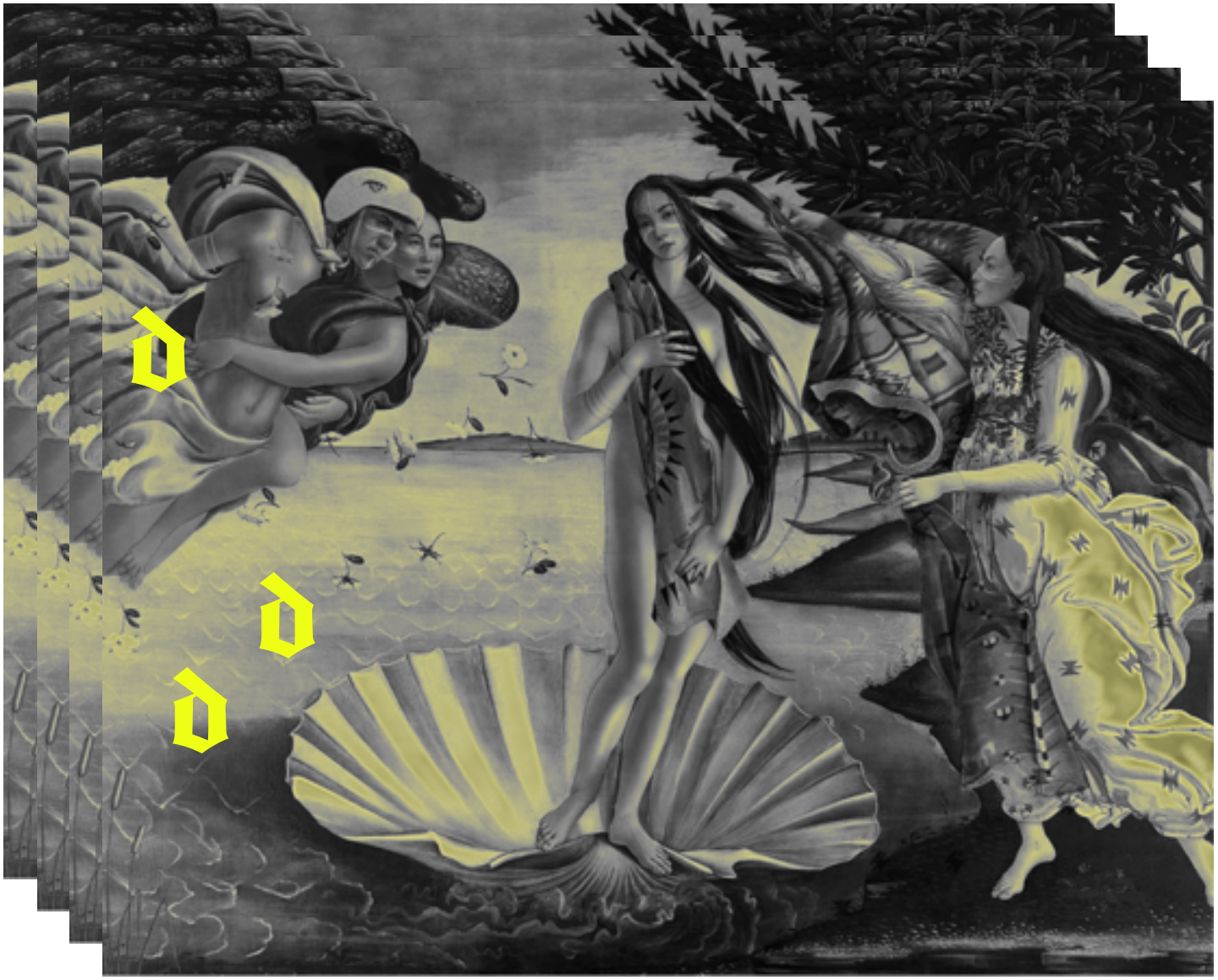

DECOLONISING SOCIAL IMPACT DESIGN

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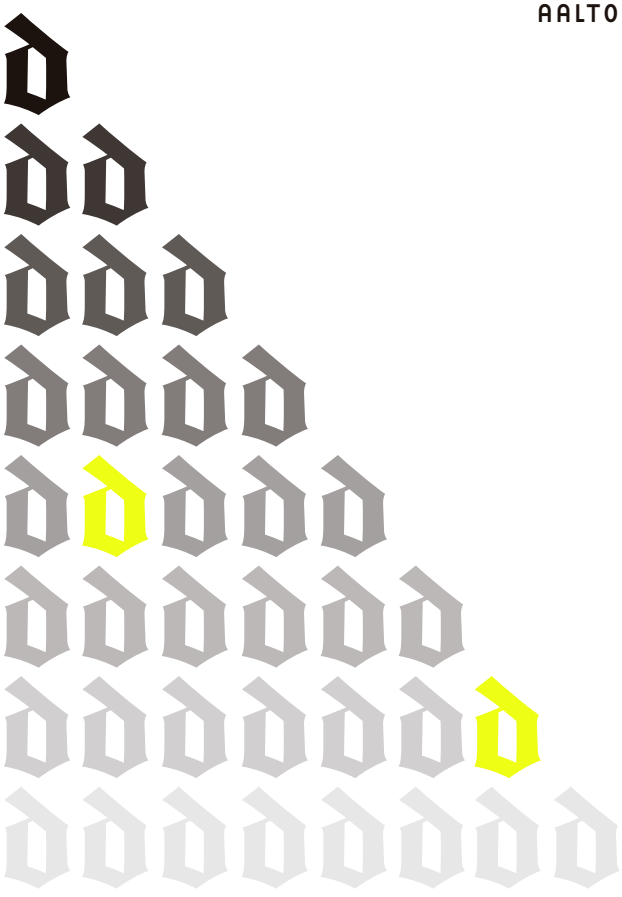

ABSTRACT

To date, mainstream design discourse is still dominated by “colonial mentality”, the preference for the Anglo-American and Eurocentric ways of experiencing the world. In general, the prevailing design practices lack alternative and marginalised discourses from the non Anglo-European sphere. Although social impact design is a growing discipline among designers, some suggest it is just a new form of Western imperialism. The concept of decolonising design has been argued to be the solution for more inclusive, diverse and non-imperialist design practices.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the problematic connection between social impact design and imperialism, understand the concept of decolonising design, and clarify the action points required of a designer from the Western context to decolonise their way of experiencing, practicing and teaching designing. The end result is a summary of key elements a designer should take into consideration, when they seek to act in a decolonised way in the field of social impact design.

The majority of the research happened online, since most of the debate and research around the idea of decolonising design is currently done in the virtual environment. However, some literature resources were reviewed to explore the topics of social impact design, design history, design anthropology, imperialism and decolonisation. Since the topic of the thesis is highly broad and controversial, this thesis manages to address only a portion of the complex web of colonial mentality, social impact design and the concept of decolonising design, and it should be explored more extensively to obtain a clearer understanding.

Keywords: design, imperialism, colonialism, colonial mentality, decolonialism, social impact design, design anthropology, decolonising design, design history, inclusivity, diversity, equity, equality

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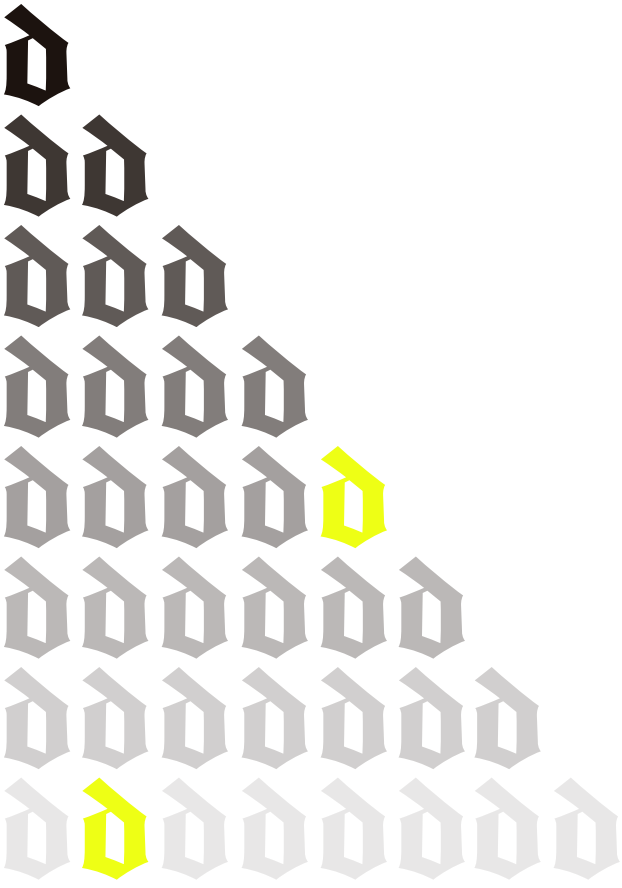

01 INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this thesis arose from my personal interest in social impact design. Social impact design has been a sphere of design that I have strongly leaned towards during both my design studies in Aalto University, as well as my additional studies at the Universities of Helsinki and Stanford. While my studies in Aalto University have revolved mostly around service design and sustainability, at Helsinki and Stanford Universities my studies have focused on anthropology, development and equality studies, which have given me more understanding of social impact design.

While exploring current topics related to the field of social impact design, I came across the concept of decolonising design. I soon realised that until that point my outlook on social impact design had been relatively naive. Even though I had already become familiar with the concept of imperialism, I had never really had the understanding to associate it with design, let alone social impact design – a branch of design whose sole purpose is to better the world. Becoming aware of the idea of decolonising design was pivotal for me as a

designer, and I became determined to find out more in order to decolonise the way I experience, practice and teach design.

The aim of this thesis is to understand critiques of social impact design as just another form of imperialism, as professor of innovation and design Bruce Nussbaum (2010) states in their blog post “Is Humanitarian Design the New Imperialism?”. Another objective is to explore the concept of decolonising design, a topic highly debated today, and clarify the action points for one to decolonise their way of experiencing, practicing and teaching design. Reflecting on these two themes, decolonising and social impact design, I aim to summarise the key elements a designer should take into consideration when they seek to act in a decolonised way in the field of social impact design.

Firstly in this thesis I dive deeper into the current situation to understand why decolonising design is such a trending topic at the moment. The concept of decolonisation is definitely not a new one, but implementing it into one’s mindset, let alone design practice, is relatively new. In order to understand the prevailing imperialistic ways of designing I felt that it is also essential to understand the definitions of imperialism and colonialism, as well as some design history, to be able to identify the connection between the three.

After clarifying the interconnection between imperialism and current design theory, practice and education, this thesis delves into the concept of social impact design and its problematic relationship with imperialism. After that my intention is to explore the concept of decolonising design, which has been argued to be the solution for more inclusive, diverse and non-imperialist design practices. Inspired by this theoretical knowledge my ambitious aim is to set some guidelines and best practices when participating in a socially impactful design project, especially when done in the Global South or when Indigenous knowledge is involved.

The majority of my research happened online, since most of the debate and research around the idea of decolonising design is currently done in the virtual environment. However, I did use some literature resources such as Designing for Social Impact by Gretchen Anderson (2015), Activation and Automaticity of Colonial Mentality by David et al. (2010) and Bauhaus by

Siedenbrodt et al. (2009) for exploring the topics of social impact design, design history, imperialism and decolonisation. I also found lots of valuable insights from the anthropological point of view from Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice by Tunstall (2013).

02 THE STATUS QUO

In an editorial statement by Decolonising Design (2016) – a research group of design scholars and practitioners such as professor Ahmed Ansari and designer and educator Danah Abdulla, aiming to decolonise the field of design – the group argues that mainstream design discourse is still dominated by Anglo-American and Eurocentric ways of experiencing the world. They critique the prevailing design practices for their lack of alternative and marginalised discourses from the non Anglo-European sphere. Western design theory, practice and pedagogy, especially the European and Euro-American ones, are seen as the one and only ways of designing, and anything alternative is seen as crafts at most. (Decolonising Design 2016.)

The group continues to argue that the diversity of the world we are living in is overall undermined by imperialism – a globalised system of power – that keeps silencing the voices of the oppressed and serving only the privileged few at the expense of their human and nonhuman others. They see the

narrowness in ways of designing as a reflection of the limitations of the institutions in which design is studied and practiced, as well as in other socio-political frameworks that it is integrated into. They state that these issues are products of modernity and its ideologies, administrations and institutions, that keep repeating, producing and applying continued colonial power upon the lives of the marginalised and oppressed in both Global South and North. (Decolonising Design 2016.)

The mindset repeating this imperialistic way of thinking, not just when it comes to design but overall thinking, is called “colonial mentality”. “Colonial mentality” or “the colonised mind” is described as a preference for whiteness and Western cultural values, behaviors, physical appearances and objects, with undesirability for anything coming from the non-West. These preferences can be traced back to the colonial era, when Indigenous peoples in Africa, the Americas, the Middle East and Asia were referred to as “wild”, “uncivilised” and even “savage” by Europeans. (David and Okazaki 2010: 850-887.) The Europeans’ sense of cultural and biological superiority led to so-called “civilising missions” to save the uncivilised races from themselves (Paris 2002: 637-656).

Today this colonial mentality extends to people living or having roots in formerly-colonised countries over generations. Colonial mentality is theorised to originally stem from classical colonialism, and reinforced through generations by internal colonialism, leading to having superior perception of whites and Western cultures. These people have a high risk of struggling with feelings of ethnic self-hatred, depression and cultural inferiority. (David and Okazaki 2010: 850-887.) Australian writer, critic and educator A. A. Phillips (1950), defines the concept of “cultural cringe”, referring to an internalised inferiority complex causing people to dismiss their own culture as inferior to the culture of other countries.

A present day example of colonial mentality or cultural cringe is presented in a narration of the Filipino-/American community in the Asian Mental Health Project’s blog post “Colonial Mentality in the Filipino-/American Community” (2020). First colonised by Spain for nearly 300 years from the 1560s to the 1890s, Japan during the Second World War from 1941-1945, and the US from 1898-1946, defining Philippines’ history or culture is difficult. It

has led to a colonised mentality, generating feelings of otherness and shame, and provoked many Filipinos pursuing the "American dream". Second-generation Filipino Americans were for example encouraged to use skin whitening products and not to stay out for too long or otherwise they "might get dark". Newborn babies' noses would be pinched for them to appear sharper, and they were bathed in milk for a fairer skin. (Colonial Mentality in the Filipino-/American Community 2020.)

Curry Stone Foundation (2021), a distinguished actor in the field of social impact design, defines social impact design as "design that seeks to solve humanitarian issues such as improving living conditions for its beneficiaries". Social impact design, also often referred to as innovation for social impact or social innovation, is a growing discipline among designers, and digitalisation and globalisation have made tackling humanitarian issues in the Global South more accessible for people living in Western countries. (Anderson, 2015.) However, to support Decolonising Design's (2016) view of design field dominated by the Western world, professor Bruce Nussbaum (2010) poses a question in his blog whether especially social impact design is a new form of imperialism: "Are designers the new anthropologists or missionaries, come to poke into village life, "understand" it and make it better – their "modern" way?".

To second Nussbaum's view, design anthropologist Elizabeth Tunstall (2013: 234) claims that design innovation, even within the social sector, reflects the modernist agenda of OECD definitions of innovation. OECD defines innovation as "the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service) or process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization, or external relations" (2005: 6). Tunstall sees that innovation is always generated by individual elites or companies, it promotes modernist values and it benefits individual companies, individual entrepreneurs and inventors, or the undifferentiated masses of society. As a high-profile example of how design innovation can act in an imperialist way, Tunstall names IDEO's and the Rockefeller Foundation's collaboration Design for Social Impact initiative. (Tunstall 2013: 234-235.) Tunstall's report on IDEO's and the Rockefeller Foundation's Design for Social Impact How-To Guide (2008) will be further explored later on in this thesis in order to gain more understanding on these views on social impact design.

As Ariel Durant, a Russian-born researcher and writer has it, “The present is the past rolled up for action, and the past is the present unrolled for understanding.” (Durant 1968). In order to understand the current situation and make insightful choices, we need to understand the past – a notion that lies in the core of the idea of decolonising design (Khandwala 2019). Thus, we are first delving into the definitions of imperialism and colonialism, as well as some design history. This helps us to identify the connection between the three, and creates a foundation for recognising the designer’s do’s and don’ts for a decolonised way of working in the field of social impact design.

PHOTO 01. Pears Soap promises to improve the complexion.

PHOTO 02. Skin whitening product ad from Bangkok, Thailand.

03 IMPERIALISM + COLONIALISM

New World Encyclopedia (2018) defines imperialism as “the forceful extension of a nation's authority by territorial conquest or by establishing economic and political domination of other nations that are not its colonies''. In the prehistoric world clans extended their territory and dominated others, competing against them for food and resources. (New World Encyclopedia 2018.) However, the so-called “Age of Imperialism” is embodied by the colonisation of the Americas between the 15th and 19th centuries, and the expansion of the United States and the European powers during the late 19th and early 20th century as a result of the Industrial Revolution, when the demand for resources and markets started to rapidly increase (Longley 2021).

The starting point of the Industrial Revolution is difficult to define. Some historians date it to the 1760s, since a number of important inventions were soon discovered, some date it further back in history, and some claim it started during the nineteenth century along with the birth of steam railways. In general, the Industrial Revolution can be defined as the increase in

production in industries such as manufacturing, mining and building, which was a result of new, advanced practices. These practices sped up the ideal of mass production and decreased the demand for human and animal labour. Thus, the Industrial Revolution led to changes in other sectors of society as well, such as agriculture and services. (More 2000: 2-3).

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines colonialism as "a broad concept that refers to the project of European political domination from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries that ended with the national liberation movements of the 1960s" (Kohn 2017). Colonialism differs from imperialism in a way that it is the physical practice of global expansion, while imperialism is the idea that drives this practice. Imperialism does not necessarily mean territorial domination, since it can occur as economic domination such as trade agreements or political influence in order to gain advantage. Thus, to put it simply, imperialism can be thought of as the cause and colonialism as the effect, and imperialism can exist without colonialism but colonialism cannot exist without imperialism. (Longley 2021.)

Even though empires justified their imperial projects as instruments for bettering the world – as drivers of development for the uncivilised – their expansions were usually violent and their motives selfish, such as exploitation of resources. Colonialism was unquestionably cruel towards Indigenous peoples, bringing about slavery, brutality and death. (Campbell et al. 2010: 36.) A colony's role was to serve the interests of the imperial power, not their own domestic needs, which in turn led to underdevelopment in the colonised nation. As a reference, before colonial times African societies were as technologically advanced as Europe. (New World Encyclopedia 2018.)

Especially after the giant human and economic costs of the Second World War, decolonisation started to proliferate extensively, as former colonial territories gained independence. However, imperialism and colonialism still exist, now referred to as modern imperialism and neocolonialism. Modern imperialism involves the expansion of corporate presence and the spreading of the dominant nation's political ideology. (Longley, 2021.) A textbook case of modern day imperialism is the United States, with its global military and economic hegemonies (Deora 2014). Neocolonialism refers to the practice of influencing a country without any colonial methods. So called

“Coca-Colonisation” is an example of neocolonialism. The concept refers to ideological Americanisation of nearly every corner of the earth. (Molag 2014.) Imperialism’s influence spans across all sectors of the society, and the world of design is no exception. In the next chapter we will explore the troublesome connection between design, imperialism and colonialism, and revisit the concept of colonial mentality, which is strongly embedded into this connection.

PHOTO 03. Comic on imperialism.

PHOTO 04. A bar in Swakopmund, Namibia.

04 DESIGN + IMPERIALISM

Designing is not a modern phenomenon. As design historian Victor Margolin (2015) points out, people of all ethnic backgrounds have always been active designers within their own communities, even when working outside the sphere of advanced industrialisation. In fact, as an example, the bronze artifact findings in Igbo-Ukwu's archaeological sites dating back to the 9th century A.D. included a level of technical and artistic proficiency and sophistication which was distinctly more advanced than contemporary bronze casting in Europe (Honour & Fleming 2005). Frank Willett (1983), an Africanist and museum curator, compares the standard of the Igbo-Ukwu design to that of five hundred years later in Europe, which proves that the birth of designing cannot be traced to modern Europe.

However, current design discourse and pedagogy revolves around modern, industrial design, represented especially by Bauhaus, a German art school operating from 1919 to 1933. Bauhaus has been thought of as being born from the impact of Deutscher Werkbund, an association of artists, architects,

PHOTO 05. Igbo Ukwu bronze pot, 9th or 10th century.

business people and experts, carried by designers like Peter Behrens and Walter Gropius. The main focus of Deutscher Werkbund was functionality and usefulness, and Bauhaus has its roots in the Industrial Revolution, which led the design ideal reverting back to simpler forms to suit the new forms of industrial production. (Siebenbrodt & Lutz 2009: 13.) The origin of Bauhaus can be also traced to the British Department of Science and Art, also known as DSA (Dutta 2007). This connection will be further explored later on in this chater.

Designer Walter Gropius was one of the founders of Bauhaus and The Art School Reform – the transformation of art academies into unified art schools – whose fundamental pedagogical concept was based on reform ideas (Siebenbrodt & Lutz 2009: 13-14). The core of Bauhaus' principle was that "form follows function" (German Press Agency 2019). As sound artist and researcher Pedro Oliveira (2020) points out, much of the present day design education relies on Bauhaus' guidelines, categorising anything differing as "handicrafts" or "vernacular". Oliveira (2020) continues to explain that this point of view connects the idea of "design" rather with the Industrial Revolution than with human activity.

As designer, writer and educator Anoushka Khandwala (2019) states in their article: "Design values and history is taught through a canon: that accepted pantheon of work by predominantly European and American male designers that sets the basis for what is deemed "good" or "bad."" Khandwala (2019) continues to explain that this imperialistic canon has had, and continues to have, an impact on three main aspects: How design is experienced, how design is practiced and how design is taught. Next we will address each of these questions one by one through examples.

How is design experienced?

Western imperialism has had an influence of how we experience design – of what is perceived as good and acceptable design, and what kinds of mental images we get from different designs. Cultural worker Clara Balaguer (2017) aptly demonstrates this argument in their conversation with graphic designer Kristian Henson as part of Walker Art Center's 2017 Insights Design Lecture Series. In 2014 NBA players wore T-shirts with a text "I can't breathe" printed in

Comic Sans in solidarity for Eric Garner, a black man choked to death by the NYPD for a minor infraction. The act arose a social movement, several designers deeming the typeface ugly and inappropriate, attempting to tell the participants how police brutality towards Garner should be represented instead.

However, as design writer John Brownlee (2014) sees it, Comic Sans is better than any other font at conveying innocence. As Brownlee continues to explain, using Comic Sans helps to humanise seemingly god-like basketball stars like LeBron James and Kobe Bryant, since as growing up as young black men they would have once been just as helpless to defend themselves against the broken system of white supremacy. As Balaguer (2017) urges: "Use Comic Sans, Curlz, Brush Script, Papyrus. Understand why people respond to it. Accept that social constituencies (not clients but constituencies) have made a choice that should be respected instead of ridiculed."

In 2016, a photo of a tote bag with Arabic text in a train in Berlin went viral on social media. The text on the bag translated into "This text has no meaning except to scare people who don't understand it". The bag was designed by Israel-based designers Sana Jammalieh and Haitham Haddad, who create T-shirts, bags and mugs that deal with social and gender issues in a humorous way. The pair sees that Arabic language and nation is being victimised, and automatically related to terrorism. (Al Jazeera 2016) The case example raises up the question of how Western imperialism, and especially the media, has impacted on our mental images, in this case our mental images of Arabic language, spoken by 1.8 billion people worldwide.

How is design practiced?

Western imperialism has also impacted on how we think design is practiced the right way. Professor of Aesthetics Ken-ichi Sasaki (2013) showcases in their article how Eastern perspective differs from the Western linear perspective. Traditional Japanese way of drawing in 3D is only based on one plane instead of having the x, y and z. Also, as graphic designer Simba Ncube narrates in Anoushka Khandwala's article in Eye on Design (2019), in Zulu culture linear perspective is not used at all. Instead, they live in a circular culture – their accommodations are round, they plough land in curves instead of straight

PHOTO 06. Bauhaus inspired house.

PHOTO 07. NBA players showing compassion for Eric Garner.

PHOTO 09. Replica of a Zulu village.

PHOTO 08. Katsushika Hokusai's Whaling Off Gotō is an example of Japanese perspective.

lines, and their villages are designed in circular formations. Both of these examples present a functional variation for modern design practice, which assumes objects presented and constructed in certain ways.

The use of different colors is a valid perspective to consider as well. As Eriksen Translations (2020) has it, colors have very different meanings in different cultures and regions. When in Western countries white represents purity and cleanliness, in many Asian cultures it represents death and mourning. In Western cultures yellow is often associated with happiness and optimism, when in some other parts of the world such as Egypt and much of Latin America the color has negative connotations. In China the color green indicates infidelity, and in India brides traditionally wear red wedding dresses as a symbol of purity. (Eriksen Translations 2020.) The way Western countries see colors is often the way they are used worldwide, which is another example of how Western imperialism has an effect on how design is practiced.

In their article designer Mahima Chandak (2018) describes some of their experiences while conducting design research in rural South India. Chandak describes two design activities conducted among the Channapatna residents, the first one built around the idea of storyboarding and the other one around storytelling. Even though the designers involved used characters inspired by traditional Channapatna dolls, the linear and logical way of thought that dominated the activity was from a Western origin, and too unfamiliar for the participants to comprehend. In the second workshop the group used action cards for storytelling to avoid the linear way of working. However, the activity only revealed an extremely complex web of power imbalances at a societal level between gender, class, age and caste as well as power imbalances within the family structure. (Chandak 2018.)

As Chandak (2018) states: “Asian countries, caught between modernity and tradition, orality and literacy, industrial and pre-industrial materiality, require a very different kind of designer: one who does not completely eliminate methods of design thinking borrowed from the West but equips oneself to critically understand the impact of the politics behind it.” As Chandak (2018) also points out, this complexity of designing in formerly colonised countries, India for instance, is a result of colonisation itself, since they are often blends of the Western ideal and local tradition. (Chandak 2018) This case example

PHOTO 10. Channapatna toys are traditionally made of wood.

clearly depicts that Western design practices are not universal, and should not be used as they were.

How is design taught?

A study on the British Department of Science and Art (DSA) conducted by the professor of architectural history Arindam Dutta (2007) questions the initial motives behind DSA. DSA is an institution that led to the formation of "design" as an object of theory, research and training, and which inspired the English Arts and Crafts movement, the Wiener Secession, the German Werkbunds and Bauhaus, and the figure of the "artisan" in the formation of Indian nationalism. The origins of contemporary design and design education is, as Dutta claims, in the aim of creating a clear distinction between modern "designer" and traditional "artisan" in order to defend capitalist-colonial relations of power against anti-imperialist uprisings. Thus, it divided the modern, functional design and design practitioners from designers, who might use design for example for political agendas, classifying the latter as inferior. (Dutta 2007.)

Prado de O. Martins et al. (2018) use Brazil as an example to describe Western imperialism's impact on design education in Parse Journal's article Three Perspectives on Decolonising Design Education. The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century brought a number of fast-paced social, economic, and political shifts to Brazil. A series of developmentalist and industrialising policies brought about a need for a new kind of workforce, one with both artistic and technical training. In order to acquire that workforce the Brazilian state developed official policies to enhance the immigration of white Europeans, in an attempt to "whiten" the racial structure of the country. (Prado de O. Martins et al. 2018.)

The first design school in Brazil, Rio de Janeiro's Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial (ESDI), was based on the model of the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) Ulm, which "sought to review the Bauhaus ideals through the perspective of a decidedly industrial society in the post-War period". ESDI's curriculum had a highly technology and production oriented approach to design education, highlighting functionality and efficiency, different from the more humanist methods common in higher education institutions in Brazil.

ESDI was strongly supported, and monitored, by the Brazilian dictators of that time. (Prado de O. Martins et al. 2018.)

As decolonial theorist Ramón Grosfoguel (2018) puts it, Westernised universities maintain disciplinary divisions and endorse knowledge from a very narrow scope of scholars, mostly male, white and Western. Grosfoguel (2018) sees this as having a risk of the formation of students who are more concerned with the needs and desires of employment markets rather than with critical thinking. Westernised universities continue to produce Westernised elites even in the Global South. (Grosfoguel 2018).

As we can conclude based on the insights from this chapter, Western imperialism impacts the ways we experience, practice and teach design. As Khandwala (201) points out, “the Western canon’s impact also extends to framing design theory as a progressive narrative of global salvation”. Next chapter delves more into Khandwala’s statement, explores the concept of social impact design, and reflects it into insights explored so far.

05 IS SOCIAL IMPACT DESIGN IMPERIALIST?

Curry Stone Foundation, a distinguished actor in the field of social impact design, defines social impact design as “design that seeks to solve humanitarian issues such as improving living conditions for its beneficiaries” (2021). Social impact design is also often referred to as innovation for social impact, humanitarian design or social innovation, but in this thesis I will only use the term social impact design. Even though social impact design is practiced both in local and non-local levels to increase the wellbeing of its target group, in order to thoroughly address modern design’s imperialist nature this thesis is mainly focused on practicing social impact design in the Global South or when Indigenous knowledge is involved.

Social impact design is a trending field especially among younger designers (Nussbaum 2010), but already in 1964, designer Ken Garland along with twenty other designers, critics, and students published a manifesto as a reaction to the staunch society of 1960s Britain, and called for a return to a more humanistic aspect of design. It criticised the fast-paced and often trivial

productions of mainstream advertising, and instead, suggested utilising design on education and public service tasks that aimed for social impact, social impact design. Nussbaum (2010) lists companies such as IDEO, the Acumen Fund, One Laptop Per Child and Project H as some of the distinguished modern day social impact design initiatives.

Andy Chen and Waqas Jawaid (2021), partners of the Brooklyn design firm Isometric Studio that aims to "advance an ethos of inclusion, equity, and justice, centering the lived experiences of marginalized people", point out that there is still work to do in the field of social impact design. They see that designers need to be more sophisticated about how they practice and talk about the role of design and respond to individual communities. With this Chen and Jawaid (2021) mean that designers should explore options more at a systemic level instead of coming up with premade solutions. It also means looking for universal solutions, acting more like sociologists or policymakers. Chen (2021) also asks an important question: "How do we design for these social issues in a way that doesn't just reflect back our own stylistic preference or celebrity or propping up of the design field, but instead creates truly empowering tools for the very people that design is supposed to benefit?"

An example of a social impact design project gone awfully wrong is told by Bruce Nussbaum. In their Fast Company blog post "When Design Harms Instead Of Helps" Nussbaum (2015) tells a personal story of participating in a design research project in the late 1960s Philippines. International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), an NGO established by the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, was designing new varieties of rice. The solution called "IR8" or "Miracle Rice" ended up tripling the rice yields, and with versions of "Miracle Wheat" and other grains, significantly diminished the number of famines worldwide. However, Miracle Rice needed much more water, fertiliser, insecticide and more fuel to grow, preventing smaller farmers from keeping up with the mass production standards. (Nussbaum 2015.) Similar examples of the "Green Revolution" can be seen from all over the world, forcing peasants to become dependent on bigger operators and getting into debt. In the past three decades hundreds of thousands of Indian farmers have committed suicide for not being able to pay their debts. (Al Jazeera 2017.) Even though the intention with the Green Revolution was good it failed to take every aspect into account.

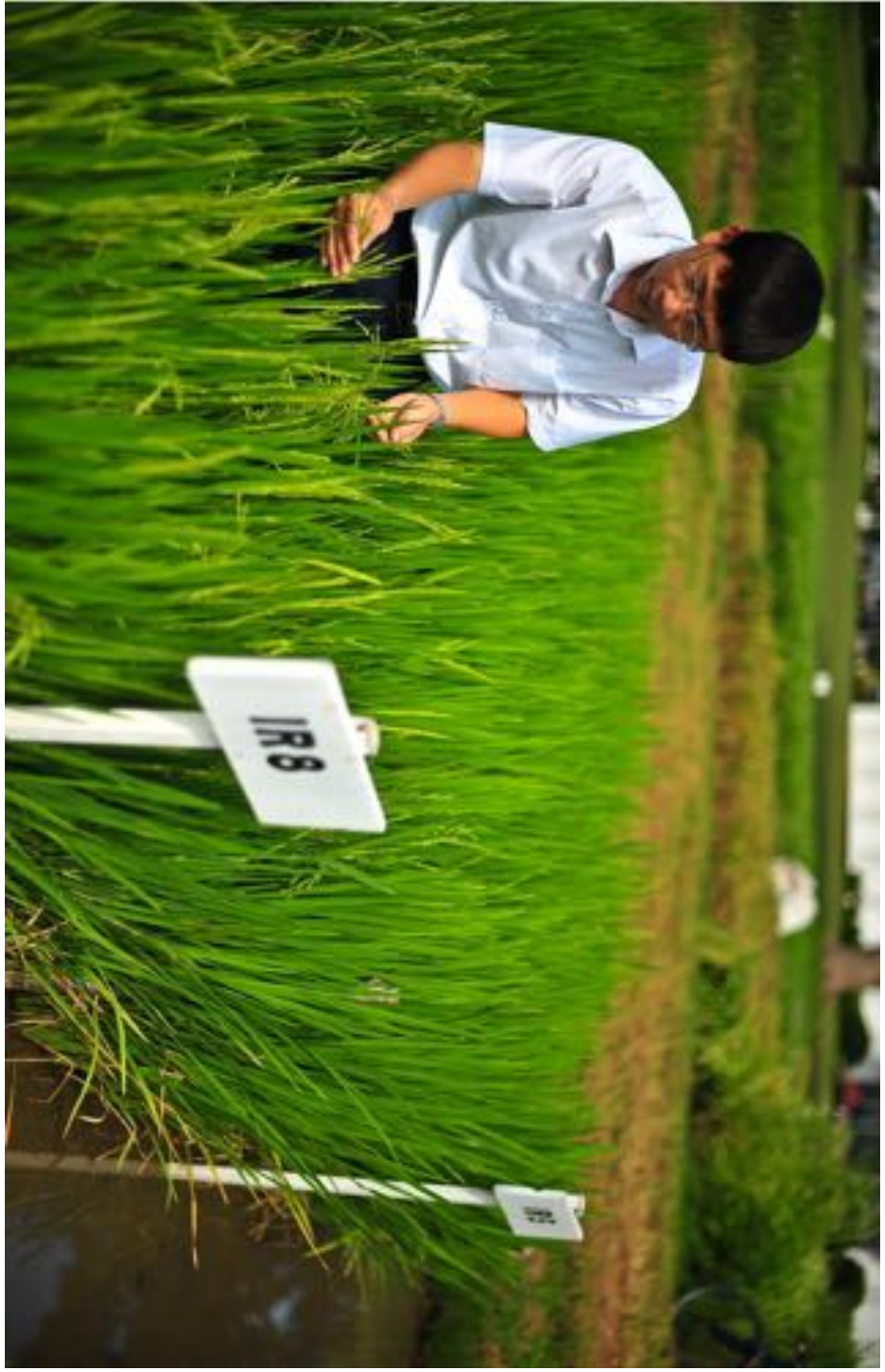

PHOTO 12. Miracle Rice field in the Philippines.

PHOTO 11. The Hippo Roller was invented by wo South Africans, Pettie Petzer and Johan Jonker.

There are many challenges when it comes to practicing social impact design, and next we will immerse ourselves deeper into the problematic nature of social impact design influenced by Western imperialism. One problem, as Khandwala (2019) explains, is that "the Western canon's impact extends to framing design theory as a progressive narrative of global salvation", giving little to no value to other ways of designing in the social impact sphere. When examining for example The Rockefeller Foundation's and IDEO's Design for Social Impact How-To Guide (2008), one of the distinguished guidebooks on the field, it becomes quickly clear that it has been produced through this Western canon. Even though it is "intended for design companies of any size or type" who wish to practice social impact design, it is composed by Western designers, showcasing Western design practices, targeting Western design companies who already understand Western design jargon. (The Rockefeller Foundation & IDEO 2008.) For instance, the reference list contains only one resource by a non-Westerner (Tunstall 2013: 236).

As we learned previously from Mahima Chandak's (2018) attempt to conduct design research in rural South India among the Channapatna residents, Western ways of thinking might not be of no use in some contexts. Chandak tried a couple of different well-known design methods – storyboarding and storytelling – for gathering insights. Both attempts failed, since Chandak was not familiar with the Channapatna community, its customs and structure. The activities only revealed the need for alternatives to Western design thinking, and promoting this Western way as the ideal way only excludes other, more suitable, non-Western ways of practicing design that could potentially lead to more authentic encounters and more precise understanding. (Chandak 2018.)

In Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice design anthropologist Elizabeth Tunstall (2013) has dedicated a whole chapter for social impact design's imperialist nature, particularly reflecting on Design for Social Impact How-To Guide. The guide was developed in a collaboration by IDEO and The Rockefeller Foundation to find out "how the design industry can play a larger role in the social sector." (The Rockefeller Foundation & IDEO 2008: 5) Tunstall's insights will be used next for gaining a deeper understanding of social impact design's problematic nature.

First, Tunstall (2013) raises up the fact that the conversation around design is commonly exclusively Western. In major academic journals on design, such as Design Issues and Design Studies, the conversations around colonialism and imperialism are written by Caucasian scholars. There are few exceptions though, for example Rajeshwari Ghose (1989), who insightfully states in their article:

“No wonder then that neither of the terms design nor development have natural equivalents in most of the Asian linguistic traditions, for they carry with them all the ideological underpinnings of First World associations, aspirations, and debates. This realization and, more recently, the deep dissatisfaction that has followed this realization, both from an ideological/ cultural as well as a pragmatic point of view, has led to some very serious soul searching among the thinking designers of Asia in recent years.” (1989: 39)

As Tunstall (2013) points out, in the Design for Social Impact How-To Guide the Western design companies are placed at the top of the design innovation process, “as active agents who guide, serve, embed, build, pay, and staff (the design processes)”. When there are non-Western actors involved they are positioned into a more passive role such as support staff or as the ones needing guidance. By doing this the history of non-Western design innovation is belittled, often in connection with processes of imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism. (Tunstall 2013: 236.)

Tunstall (2013) also notes that even though the Design for Social Impact lists the main beneficiaries of innovation as the participating companies and individuals, the general society, and the community, the community benefits are often limited, since the innovations are usually left in the prototype phase giving no concrete benefits to the community. Each strategic approach is evaluated against its benefit to the company and social impact, but the social impact benefits are not clearly stated, as they are in the case of benefits to the company. Social impact is defined as the “capacity of this type of work to create positive social change on communities and individuals”, but it is represented only as a graphic circle without any description of what that social impact might be. (Tunstall 2013: 238.)

As Tunstall (2013) continues to explain, “the Design for Social Impact initiative explicitly seeks to transfer the resources of philanthropic foundations and local NGOs to Western design companies”. This places local design companies in direct competition with the Western ones. Tunstall states that even though IDEO is a good company, it fails to respect the value systems of the communities it seeks to help. Tunstall states that it resembles what Linda Smith refers to as the new wave of imperialist processes that “enter with goodwill in their front pocket and patents in their back pocket” (1999: 24).

Thus, when we reflect on the question whether social impact design is imperialist – yes, it can be if it is done using the methods of Western design thinking similar to the ones used in IDEO’s Design for Social Impact Guide How-To Guide. The idea of decolonising design has been said to be the solution for practicing design in a sophisticated, inclusive and impartial way, and the next chapter is dedicated to understanding that.

06 DECOLONISING DESIGN

As Anoushka Khandwala (2019) puts it simply in their blog post “What Does It Mean to Decolonize Design?”, the key to decolonising design is realising that the design standards we have been taught are not universal. One of the well-known actors on decolonising design is a research group Decolonising Design, composed by academics, researchers, and practitioners working in and with the fields of design studies and design research. As the collective puts it in their editorial statement (2016), it was “born out of a general frustration with how design ontologies and epistemologies are constituted andvalidated within and outside academia”. The founders wanted to offer a platform in which knowledge sharing on decolonising design could take place. Addressing the group’s objectives further gives a better understanding on what decolonising design is about.

Professor Ahmed Ansari (2018) describes the work done at Decolonising Design in their blog post “What a Decolonisation of Design Involves: Two Programmes for Emancipation”. Firstly, they aim to challenge and critique the

mainstream contemporary academic and professional discourse, and raise more discussions around issues of gender, race, culture and class. They aim to clear more space for the non-Western epistemologies and practices. Until now, non-Western ways of designing have not been taken seriously, and instead, additional, systemic design methods have been developed, categorising non-Western design as crafts over and over again. The group also aims to increase the understanding of the colonial world system, and how it continues to reign through artifice, and actively bring forth alternative design discourses.

Secondly, they define and develop alternatives to the colonial world-system from design's perspective. With this they mean firstly by delinking from the present world-system – refusing to act with and through the institutions that keep repeating, producing and applying principles of colonialism, as well as epistemic de-linking – decoupling oneself from the Western canon and from Western design frameworks, methods, techniques and practices. De-linking also refers to exploring the past and recognising the practices that might have been overpowered by the obsession for modernity. Lastly, creating those design practices and cultivating different ways of thinking that are alternative to the neocolonial world-system and free-market capitalism.

The concept of decolonisation originally meant the withdrawal of a state from a former colony. Today, decolonisation represents a whole raft of ideas: the realisation that in the West society has been built upon the colonisation of other nations, that our system is based on privilege and oppression, and that a lot of "our" culture has actually been appropriated or stolen. (Khandwala 2019) To reflect on Khandwala's point of view, the first step to decolonising design is to acknowledge this colonial mentality addressed earlier in this thesis in the context of design.

The second step suggested by Khandwala (2019) is aiming to eliminate the false distinctions between craft and design, in order to recognise all culturally important forms of making. Classifying ways of designing done by people from poorer backgrounds as different from modern design positions histories and practices of design from many cultures inferior. As a reference Khandwala uses Ghanaian textiles. Barnett (2020) encourages designers to get rid of labels, not referring to African design as "primitive" or "tribal". "These words

PHOTO 14. ModSkool, a modular anti-eviction school desgigned by locals.

PHOTO 13. Avinash Kumar's Antariksha Sanchar.

on their own are not bad words, but white people have created this division between what is high and low and what you should aspire to," Barnett (2020) says.

As Barnett (2020) continues to explain, one should also stop dividing design into modern and traditional design:

"But did you know you can find modernist design in Mexico–just look at the National Museum of Anthropology by architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez. Or consider British-Ghanaian architect David Adjaye, best known for the National Museum of African American History and Culture. And does "traditional" conjure Chesterfield sofas, wingback chairs and other 18th and 19th century European trappings? Lacy Bamileke tables, carved from a single tree trunk, have been traditional choices for Cameroonian rulers for centuries—what could be more "classic" than that? Freeing yourself from conventional categories allows more creativity." (Barnett 2020)

Barnett (2020) also encourages designers to broaden their references outside Western designers, travel to places less predictable than Paris and Milan, and learn how different things are actually made, without appropriating them.

Khandwala (2019) also points out that designers should give up on the idea of Western design thinking as the progressive method especially in the field of social impact design, and ignoring alternative ways of knowing. When Western design methods are centered in design, decided by a homogenous group of people, it results in the majority of designers striving for the same and seeing everything else as inferior. (Khandwala 2019.) Like we learned from Chandak's (2018) example, the Western way does not necessarily work outside Western environments.

Khandwala (2019) encourages to question how solutions might be experienced in someone else's shoes, and it can extend to something small like selecting typefaces. Western canon has determined the fonts that are "timeless", but how does a diverse audience react to it? Khandwala sees it important also to recognise when to use certain images and how to use them respectfully. As an example they use the tea packaging design by UK's East India Company, which uses traditional Indian patterns in their design.

Considering The East India's Trading Company's historical role in exploiting India's resources (Aziz 2018) the design is extremely irresponsible and inappropriate. (Khandwala 2019.)

As we can learn from the previous example, when engaging Indigenous knowledge and cultures in design practice, a risk for cultural appropriation is always present. Cultural appropriation is generally understood as the taking or use of the cultural products of "cultural insiders" by "cultural outsiders" (Young 2005: 136). International Indigenous Charter (2018), a guide providing guidance for designers to produce informed, authentic and respectful outcomes when representing culture, suggests ten factors to take into consideration when engaging Indigenous knowledge and cultures in design practice in order to prevent incidents such as cultural appropriation. The charter attracted considerable interest and support when presented at the Hong Kong Business of Design Week in 2018, and is now "acknowledged globally as providing a clear pathway to achieve authentic and respectful representation of Indigenous culture in design practice" (Kennedy 2019).

Firstly, it encourages to engage with local Indigenous designers who are connected with their communities and provide opportunities for them. Secondly, it insists designers respect the rights of Indigenous peoples to determine the application of their traditional knowledge and representation of their culture in the design process. Thirdly, it states that designers need to develop a cultural awareness to recognise the diversities and sensibilities of each Indigenous culture. The fourth point urges to make sure to be inclusive, listen carefully and communicate with the intention to learn, not to teach. Fifth factor is to acknowledge and respect Indigenous knowledge in general, and understand that ownership of this knowledge must remain with the Indigenous custodians.

Next aspect encourages cultivating respectful, culturally specific and personal engagement without undue pressure, and understanding that consultation may require more time for common understanding. Seventh point suggests designers to ensure Indigenous people share in the benefits from the use of their cultural knowledge, especially in commercial contexts. The eighth guideline encourages to consider the impact of design – they need to protect the environment, be sustainable and remain respectful of

Indigenous cultures, and ensure the culture's representation. The ninth point urges designers to make sure all appropriate permissions are obtained when required, and respect copyright, moral rights and cultural rights. Lastly, the charter encourages to question if there is an aspect to any project that may be improved with Indigenous knowledge.

Related to the last point, Anoushka Khandwala (2019) encourages designers to bravely take themselves out of the equation when they cannot identify with the lived experiences of the audience they need to communicate with. As an example Khandwala presents an organisation run by black immigrants, and states that surely the designer communicating its message should reflect the identity of the organisation. Khandwala continues to explain, that when the project is not yours to take, promote someone more appropriate to take your place – it might lead to providing an opportunity to someone from a marginalised background.

The points highlighted in the charter support my attempt to try to come up with guidelines on decolonising social impact design. However, it does not encourage the designer to have a look at the history, or does it refer to the concept of decolonising design or actually understanding it. Thus, in addition to the charter's efforts I am reflecting on all the other insights from decolonising design and social impact design to come up with the nine point action plan presented in the next chapter.

07 DECOLONISING SOCIAL IMPACT DESIGN

As we have learned from the previous chapters, imperialism and colonialism has had, and continues to have, an impact on how we experience, practice and teach design. By repeating this Western canon we are for our part amplifying its validity. (Khandwala 2019.) Even though social impact design is usually practiced by well-intended people it can come off completely wrong – as a new form of Western imperialism, overpowering the so-called “less developed” participants in the name of innovation and development. A valid example of a social impact design gone wrong is the case of “Miracle Rice” presented by Bruce Nussbaum (2015) in the chapter on social impact design.

Decolonising design has been argued to be the solution for more inclusive, diverse and non-imperialist design practices (Khandwala 2019). In this chapter I present a set of guidelines and best practices when participating in a socially impactful design project, especially when done in the Global South or when Indigenous knowledge is involved. This nine point action plan is based on my insights from research for this thesis. First I point out some steps one can take

in order to decolonise their ways of experiencing design. After that I move to guidelines on how to practice design in a decolonised, unoppressive way in an actual design project. In the end I focus on how to move design education forward into a decolonised way.

Prepare to question what you have learned

The mainstream design discourse is dominated by Anglo-American and Eurocentric ways of experiencing the world. The prevailing design discourse lacks alternative and marginalised discourses from the non Anglo-European sphere. (Decolonising Design 2016.) The practices and views this Western canon suggests are not universal (Khandwala 2016), and as we have learned from the examples by cultural worker Clara Balaguer (2017) on using Comic Sans in the NBA players' shirts, or the tote bag with Arabic text by designers Sana Jammalieh and Haitham Haddad Al Jazeera 2016), people have diverse ways of experiencing design. Prepare to question everything you have been taught through this Western canon, and recognise that there are, have been and will always be other ways of experiencing, practicing and teaching design.

Take a look at the history

Imperialism's influence spans across all sectors of the society, and the world of design is no exception. Current design discourse and pedagogy revolves around modern, industrial design, represented especially by Bauhaus born from the impact of Deutscher Werkbund. Bauhaus has its roots in the Industrial Revolution, which led to a design ideal reverting back to simpler forms to suit the new forms of industrial production. (Siebenbrodt & Lutz 2009: 13.) As sound artist and researcher Pedro Oliveira (2020) points out, much of the present day design education relies on Bauhaus' guidelines of "form follows function", categorising anything differing as "handicrafts" or "vernacular". Educate yourself on alternative design histories, not the Anglo-American and Eurocentric ones we are most commonly taught.

Forget the labels

Barnett (2020) encourages designers to get rid of labels, not for instance referring to African design as "primitive" or "tribal", or any design as "modern"

or “traditional”. Barnett (2020) also pushes designers to broaden their references outside Western designers, travel to places that are not so predictable as Paris and Milan are, and learn how different things are actually made, without appropriating them. As Khandwala (2019) states, classifying ways of designing done by people from poorer backgrounds as different from modern design positions histories and practices of design from many cultures inferior. Design is design. Understand it as a human activity instead of as a tool for mass production or industrialisation. All forms of creating are equally important and meaningful.

Open your mind to alternative ways

Khandwala (2019) points out that designers should give up on the idea of Western design thinking as the progressive method especially in the field of social impact design, and ignoring alternative ways of knowing. When Western design methods are centered in design, decided by a homogenous group of people, it results in the majority of designers striving for the same and seeing everything else as inferior. (Khandwala 2019.) Like we learned from Chandak’s (2018) example, the Western way does not necessarily work outside Western environments. Actively seek alternative ways of designing and explore designers working outside the Western design discourse. Resorting to just one way of designing prevents you from actually developing and might strengthen or result in biases.

Make sure the impact is positive

As we learned from Nussbaum’s (2015) case example of “Miracle Rice”, without careful consideration the impact of a social impact project might end up being negative. Tunstall (2013) notes that even though the Rockefeller Foundation’s and IDEO’s Design for Social Impact How-To Guide lists the main beneficiaries of innovation as the participating companies and individuals, the general society, and the community, the community benefits are often limited, since the innovations are usually left in the prototype phase giving no concrete benefits to the community. Make sure the main beneficiary in the project is the community, ensure the solution does not get stuck in the prototyping phase and make sure the solution is not actually harmful. Try to focus on designing systems instead of focusing on a single problem.

Do not raise yourself in the expert position

As Tunstall (2013: 236) points out, in the Design for Social Impact How-To Guide the Western design companies are placed at the top of the design innovation process, "as active agents who guide, serve, embed, build, pay, and staff (the design processes)". When there are non-Western actors involved they are positioned into a more passive role such as support staff or as the ones needing guidance. International Indigenous Indigenous Charter (2018) encourages designers to engage with local Indigenous designers who are connected with their communities. Forget the role of a design expert or consultant. Instead of facilitating and guiding, have compassion, learn to listen and immerse yourself into real connections with people. You should not be designing for people, but with people.

Be respectful and do not appropriate

Khandwala (2019) sees it important to recognise when to use different design elements and how to use them respectfully. As an example they use the tea packaging design by UK's East India Company, which uses traditional Indian patterns in their design. Considering The East India's Trading Company's historical role in exploiting India's resources (Aziz 2018) the design is extremely irresponsible and inappropriate. (Khandwala 2019.) When engaging Indigenous knowledge and cultures in design practice, a risk for cultural appropriation is always present. Make sure you respect their rights to determine the use of their traditional knowledge and representation of their culture, and acknowledge their different ways of designing.

Create opportunities

Khandwala (2019) encourages designers to bravely take themselves out of the equation when they cannot identify with the lived experiences of the audience they need to communicate with. Khandwala continues to explain, that when the project is not for yours to take, promote someone more appropriate to take your place – it might lead to providing an opportunity to someone from a marginalised background. Involve and empower as many people as you can from the community – the real people, not the elite operating in the area. Let them design for themselves in a way that resonates

with them, and learn to understand why they do so. If it is in any case possible, step out completely.

Be an advocate for change

As decolonial theorist Ramón Grosfoguel (2018) puts it, Westernised universities maintain disciplinary divisions and endorse knowledge from a very narrow scope of scholars, mostly male, white and Western. Ansari (2018) describes the work done at Decolonising Design in their blog post “What a Decolonisation of Design Involves: Two Programmes for Emancipation”. They aim to challenge and critique the mainstream contemporary academic and professional discourse, and raise more discussions around issues of gender, race, culture and class. They also aim to clear more space for the non-Western epistemologies and practices. Share your knowledge, question, and call for a change.

08 DISCUSSION

The aim of this thesis was to explore the argument of social impact design as another form of imperialism, as Nussbaum (2010) states in their blog post “Is Humanitarian Design the New Imperialism?”. Another objective was to understand the concept of decolonising design, a topic highly debated today, and clarify the action points for one to decolonise their way of thinking, practicing and teaching design. Reflecting on these two themes my aim was to summarise the key elements a designer should take into consideration, when they seek to act in a decolonised way on the field of social impact design.

When we reflect on the question whether social impact design is imperialist – yes, it can be if it is done using the methods of Western design thinking similar to the ones used in IDEO’s Design for Social Impact How-To Guide. This guide was reflected against the insights I gathered on decolonising design, and the nine-point action plan I created is the end result of this reflection. The action plan is focused on helping designers who experience, practice and

teach design in a Western way – to decolonise their ways of designing, especially socially impactful design, when done in the Global South or when Indigenous knowledge is involved. However, I see that these points can give valuable food for thought for everyone.

There are definitely some contradictory viewpoints to consider when exploring the broad topic of decolonising social impact design further. For example, what could be the correct way of knowledge-sharing between Western and non-Western design methodologies, so it is neither appropriating or overpowering? How can co-design be practiced in a way that it is sensitive enough? What if the local values are unsustainable from the Western point of view, or if there are human rights issues involved? How do you concretely measure impact in a social impact project?

Thus, based on the research my suggestion would be to create a thorough, updated guide for social impact design, that takes the above said aspects and Western design's imperialist nature better into account. This could be a topic to approach for example as a Master's thesis. The guide should be targeted to all kinds of designers in the field of social impact design, not only the ones impacted by the Western canon, and it should promote equal and inclusive design methods. It should explore alternative ways of designing and provide different ways of approaching design problems. It should also present reliable methods for measuring social impact.

As I have struggled with my new-found view on social impact design, I also struggled with the conflict of whether I had the right to even write about these topics, since I was not sure if this was "my story to tell". Even though I have my roots in Soviet Karelia, which has had its fair share of imperialist oppression, and as a lgbt+ woman I have encountered bias and discrimination, I cannot begin to understand the challenges Indigenous peoples, or people in the Global South have faced and are still facing as the result of imperialism.

Thus, I did not want to be another white person from a Western welfare state trying to write from the perspective of the oppressed, since it is a setting I am strongly criticising in this thesis. However, I took writing this thesis as a chance for personal reflection, to understand my Western privilege and

decolonise my own way of, not just designing, but of living. As a chance to unlearn what I have learned, and pass it on. And most of all, as a chance to act as an ally for the oppressed and the excluded.

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